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Ficus Plants for Hawai'i Landscapes

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Ficus, the fig genus, is part of the family Moraceae. Jackfruit, breadfruit, cecropia, and mulberry also belong to this family. The objective of this publication is to list the common fig plants used in landscaping and identify some of the species found in botanical gardens in Hawai'i.

When we think of ficus (banyan) trees, we often think of large trees with aerial roots. This is certainly accurate for *Ficus benghalensis* (Indian banyan), *Ficus microcarpa* (Chinese banyan), and many others. *Ficus benghalensis* (Indian banyan, Fig. 1) are the large banyans located in the center of Thomas Square in Honolulu; the species is also featured in Disneyland (although the tree there is artificial). *Ficus microcarpa* (Chinese banyan, Fig. 2) has foliage similar to *Ficus benjamina* (weeping fig, Fig. 4), but Chinese banyan produces many more aerial roots. Weeping fig also has a more graceful, weeping habit of growth. A wasp that lays eggs in the leaves (Fig. 3), which results in excessive dropping of leaves, prefers Chinese banyan to weeping fig.

Ficus altissima (council tree, Fig. 5) is similar to Indian banyan and can be found close to McCoy pavilion at Ala Moana Park on O'ahu. *Ficus macrophylla* (Moreton Bay fig, Fig. 6) is also large and somewhat tolerant of beach conditions. A large specimen can be seen at Kailua Beach Park on O'ahu. *Ficus religiosa* (bo tree, Fig. 7) has religious connotations for Buddhists; a large specimen can be found at Moanalua Park, O'ahu, and in front of Hamilton Hall on the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa campus. *Ficus elastica* (Indian rubber tree) was the natural source of rubber before synthetic rubber was invented.

Many ornamental *Ficus* species exist, and probably the most colorful one is *Ficus elastica* 'Schrijveriana' (Fig. 8). Other *Ficus elastica* cultivars are 'Abidjan' (Fig. 9), 'Decora' (Fig. 10), 'Asahi' (Fig. 11), and 'Gold' (Fig. 12). Other banyan trees are *Ficus lacor* (pakur tree), which can be seen at Foster Garden, O'ahu, *Ficus benjamina* 'Comosa' (comosa benjamina, Fig. 13), which can be seen on the UH Mānoa campus, *Ficus neriifolia* 'Nemoralis' (Fig. 14), which can be seen at the UH Lyon Arboretum, and *Ficus rubiginosa* (rusty fig, Fig. 15).

In tropical rain forests, many birds and other animals feed on the fruits of different *Ficus* species. In Hawaii this can be a negative feature, because large numbers of myna birds tend to roost in banyan trees at night, depositing a lot of droppings on everything below by morning. The fallen fig fruits and the bird droppings are costly to clean. The only commercially produced edible fig is *Ficus carica* (edible fig, Fig. 16).

Some of the smaller fig trees that are used in Hawai'i landscaping are *Ficus auriculata* (Fig. 17), *Ficus aspera* (clown fig, Fig. 18), *Ficus binnendykii* 'Alii' (narrow-leaf fig, Fig. 19), *Ficus celebensis* (willow ficus, Fig. 20), *Ficus lyrata* (fiddle-leaf fig, Fig. 21), *Ficus microcarpa* 'Variegata' (variegated Chinese banyan, Fig. 22), *Ficus pseudopalma* (Philippine fig, Fig. 23), and *Ficus saussureana* (Fig. 24). You must see these trees in landscapes to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of each species. Clown fig is one of the most colorful fig plants, and willow ficus has an attractive weeping growth habit. The variegated Chinese banyan is an attractive tree, and the Philippine fig gives the landscape a very tropical look.

Many *Ficus* trees have been used in shady landscapes or indoor conditions. Some examples are *Ficus microcarpa* (Chinese banyan, Fig. 2), *Ficus benjamina* (weeping fig, Fig. 3), *Ficus binnendykii* 'Alii' (narrow-leaf ficus, Fig. 19), *Ficus lyrata* (fiddle-leaf fig, Fig. 21), *Ficus elastica* 'Abidjan' (Fig. 10), and *Ficus elastica* 'Decora' (Fig. 11).

Ficus plants used as shrubs are *Ficus microcarpa* var. *crassifolia* (wax ficus, Fig. 25), *Ficus sagittata* 'Variegata' (Fig. 26), *Ficus triangularis* (Fig. 27), and *Ficus deltoidea* (mistletoe fig, Fig. 28). Wax ficus is a very drought tolerant and hardy plant. In Waikiki, wax ficus is one of the best shrub and hedge plant materials. *Ficus sagittata* 'Variegata' (Fig. 26) is a very attractive variegated shrub and can be combined with variegated Chinese banyan (Fig. 22) to produce a nicely variegated landscape garden. *Bougainvillea* 'Raspberry Ice' could be added to create a very effective plant combination.

In times past, *Ficus pumila* (creeping fig, Fig. 29) was often used as a creeping vine on stone walls, and *Ficus tikoua* (Waipahu fig, Fig. 30) was a common ground cover. *Ficus subulata*, which is a small-leaved ficus, and *Ficus microcarpa* (Chinese banyan, Fig. 2) are often made into bonsai plants.

Ficus plants have many landscape uses. Learning about them and their landscape uses would certainly expand your choices of landscape plant materials. I include here a list of ficus plants to consider for your tropical landscape. It was difficult at times to decide which species and cultivars to include. For example, Ira Condit (1969) listed and discussed the *Ficus benjamina* cultivars 'Benjamina', 'Waringiana', 'Comosa', 'Nuda', and 'Exotica' (Fig. 31). It is beyond the scope of this brief publication to discuss all the varieties of all *Ficus* species.

The color pictures may help you to identify and decide how to use these ficus plants in landscapes. Some of the large ones can produce invasive roots that will uplift pavements and disturb irrigation systems. The cost of pruning some of the larger trees can be prohibitive. So decide carefully, and obtain professional advice when using some of the large ficuses.

Some ficuses to consider

Ficus altissima (council tree)
Ficus aspera (clown fig)
Ficus auriculata, syn. *Ficus roxburghii*
Ficus benghalensis (Indian banyan)
Ficus benjamina (weeping fig)
Ficus benjamina 'Exotica'
Ficus benjamina 'Comosa'
Ficus binnendykii 'Alii' (narrow-leaf ficus)
Ficus carica (common edible fig)
Ficus celebinsis (willow ficus)
Ficus deltoidea (mistletoe fig) syn. *Ficus diversifolia*
Ficus elastica (Indian rubber tree)
Ficus elastica 'Abidjan' (abidjan)
Ficus elastica 'Asahi' (asahi)
Ficus elastica 'Decora' (decora)
Ficus elastica 'Gold'
Ficus elastica 'Schrijveriana' (schrijvariana)
Ficus lacor (pakur tree)
Ficus lingua (box-leaved fig) syn. *Ficus buxifolia*
Ficus lyrata (fiddle-leaf fig)
Ficus macrophylla (Moreton Bay fig)
Ficus microcarpa (Chinese banyan)
Ficus microcarpa var. *crassifolia* (wax ficus)
Ficus microcarpa 'Variegata' (variegated Chinese ficus)
Ficus neriifolia 'Nemoralis'
Ficus philippinensis
Ficus pseudopalma (Philippine fig)
Ficus pumila (creeping fig) syn. *Ficus repens*
Ficus religiosa (bo tree or sacred fig)
Ficus rubiginosa (Port Jackson fig or rusty fig)
Ficus rubiginosa 'Variegata' (variegated rusty fig)
Ficus sagittata 'Variegata',
 syn. *Ficus radicans* 'Variegata'
Ficus saussureana, syn. *Ficus dawei*
Ficus stricta
Ficus subulata, syn. *Ficus salicifolia*
Ficus tikoua (Waipahu fig)

Resources

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 Condit, Ira J. 1969. Ficus: The exotic species. University of California, Division of Agricultural Sciences.
 Rauch, Fred, and Paul Weissich. 2000. Plants for tropical landscapes. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.
 Staples, George W., and Derral R. Herbst. 2005. A tropical garden flora. Bishop Museum Press, Honolulu.



1. *Ficus benghalensis* (Indian banyan)



2. *Ficus microcarpa* (Chinese banyan)



1. *Ficus benghalensis*



3. Wasp damage to Chinese banyan



4. *Ficus benjamina* (weeping fig)



5. *Ficus altissima* (council tree)



5. *Ficus altissima*



6. *Ficus macrophylla* (Moreton Bay fig)



6. *Ficus macrophylla*



7. *Ficus religiosa* (bo tree)



8. *Ficus elastica* 'Schrijveriana'



9. *Ficus elastica* 'Abidjan'

Ficus elastica (Indian rubber tree)



10. *Ficus elastica* 'Decora'



11. *Ficus elastica* 'Asahi'



12. *Ficus elastica* 'Gold'



13. *Ficus benjamina* 'Comosa'



14. *Ficus neriifolia* 'Nemoralis'



15. *Ficus rubiginosa* (rusty fig)



16. *Ficus carica* (edible fig)



17. *Ficus auriculata*



18. *Ficus aspera* (clown fig)



19. *Ficus binnendykii* 'Alii' (narrowleaf fig)



20. *Ficus celebensis* (willow ficus)



22. *Ficus microcarpa* 'Variegata'
(variegated Chinese banyan)



21. *Ficus lyrata* (fiddle-leaf fig)



23. *Ficus pseudopalma* (Philippine fig)



24. *Ficus saussureana*



25. *Ficus microcarpa* var. *crassifolia* (wax ficus)



26. *Ficus sagittata* 'Variegata'



27. *Ficus triangularis*



28. *Ficus deltoidea* (mistletoe fig)



29. *Ficus pumila* (creeping fig)



30. *Ficus tikoua* (Waipahu fig)



31. *Ficus benjamina* 'Exotica'